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BULLETIN OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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MEMBERS' RECEPTION

THE President and Trustees will receive the members of the Museum and their friends in the main Fifth Avenue Hall on Thursday evening, November 14th, at half past eight o'clock.

There will be music by an orchestra of sixty men, under the direction of David Mannes of the Philharmonic Society.

Admission will be by the Park Entrance.

TWO WAYS OF PAINTING*

AMONG the more recent acquisitions of the Metropolitan Museum is a brilliant and altogether remarkable little picture by John Sargent, entitled *The Hermit*. Mr. Sargent is a portrait painter by vocation, and the public knows him best as a penetrating and sometimes cruel reader of human character. He is a mural painter by avocation and capable, on occasion, of a monumental formality. In this picture, as in the wonderful collection of water colors in the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, one fancies one sees the essential John Sargent, working for himself alone without regard to external demands, and doing what he really cares most to do. In such work he is a modern of the moderns and, in the broadest sense of the word, a thorough impressionist. Not that he shows himself a disciple of Monet, or occupies himself with the broken touch or the

division of tones — his method is as direct as that of Sorolla and his impressionism is of the same kind; a bending of all his energies to the vivid realization of the effect of the scene rendered as one might perceive it in the first flash of vision if one came upon it unexpectedly. This picture is better than Sorolla — it is better than almost anyone. It is perhaps the most astonishing realization of the modern ideal, the most accomplished transcript of the actual appearance of nature, that has yet been produced. It is because of its great merit, because of its extraordinary success in what it attempts, that it leads one to the serious consideration of the nature of the attempt and of the gain and loss involved in the choice that modern art has made.

The picture is exactly square — the choice of this form is, of itself, typically modern in its unexpectedness — and represents a bit of rough wood interior under intense sunlight. The light is studied for its brilliancy rather than for its warmth, and if the picture has a fault, granted the point of view of the painter, it is in a certain coldness of color; but such conditions of glaring and almost colorless light do exist in nature. One sees a few straight trunks of some kind of pine or larch, a network of branches and needles, a tumble of moss-spotted and lichenized rocks, a confusion of floating lights and shadows, and that is all. The conviction of truth is instantaneous — it is an actual bit of nature, just as the painter found it. One is there on that ragged hill-side, half dazzled by the moving spots of light, as if set down there suddenly, with no time to adjust one's vision. Gradually one's eyes clear and one is aware,

*From *The Field of Art* in *Scribner's Magazine*, October, 1912, reprinted with the permission of the Editor.

first of a haggard human head with tangled beard and unkempt hair, then of an emaciated body. There is a man in the wood! And then — did they betray themselves by some slight movement?— there are a couple of slender antelopes who were but now invisible and who melt into their surroundings again at the slightest inattention. It is like a pictorial demonstration of protective coloring in men and animals.

Now, almost any one can see how superbly all this is rendered. Any one can marvel at and admire the free and instantaneous handling, the web of slashing and apparently meaningless brush strokes which, at a given distance, take their places by a kind of magic, and *are* the things they represent. But it takes a painter to know how justly it is observed. In these days no painter, whatever may be his deepest convictions, can escape the occasional desire to be modern; and most of us have attempted, at one time or another, the actual study of the human figure in the open air. We have taken our model into a walled garden or a deep wood or the rocky ravine of a brook, and have set ourselves seriously to find out what a naked man or woman really looks like in the setting of outdoor nature. And we have found just what Sargent has painted. The human figure, as a figure, has ceased to exist. Line and structure and all that we have most cared for have disappeared. Even the color of flesh has ceased to count, and the most radiant blond skin of the fairest woman has become an insignificant pinkish spot no more important than a stone and not half so important as a flower. Humanity is absorbed into the landscape.

Obviously, there are two courses open to the painter. If he is a modern by feeling and by training, full of curiosity and of the scientific temper, caring more for the investigation of the aspects of nature and the rendering of natural light and atmosphere than for the telling of a story or the construction of a decoration, he will, if he is able enough, treat his matter much as Sargent has treated it. The figure will become, for him, only an incident in the landscape. It will be important only as a thing of another texture and another color,

valuable for the different way in which it receives the light and reflects the sky, just as rocks and foliage and water and bare earth are valuable. For to the true impressionist light and atmosphere are the only realities, and objects exist only to provide surfaces for the play of light and atmosphere. He will abandon all attempt at rendering the material and physical significance of the human form, and will still less concern himself with its spiritual significance. He will gain a great vividness of illusion, and he may console himself for what he loses with the reflection that he has expressed the true relation of man to the universe — that he has expressed either man's insignificance or man's oneness with nature, according as his temper is pessimistic or optimistic.

If on the other hand, the painter is one to whom the figure as a figure means much; one to whom line and bulk and modeling are the principal means of expression, and who cares for the structure and stress of bone and muscle; if the glow and softness of flesh appeal strongly to him; above all, if he has the human point of view, and thinks of his figures as people engaged in certain actions, having certain characters, experiencing certain states of mind and body; then he will give up the struggle with the truths of aspect that seem so vital to the painter of the other type and by a frank use of conventions will seek to increase the importance of his figure at the expense of its surroundings. He will give it firmer lines and clearer edges, will strengthen its light and shade, will dwell upon its structure or its movement and expression. He will so compose his landscape as to subordinate it to his figure, and will make its lines echo and accentuate that figure's action or repose. When he has accomplished his task he will have painted, not man insignificant before nature, but man dominating nature.

All truths are good, and all ways of painting are legitimate that are necessary to the expression of any truth. I am not here concerned to show that one way is better than another, or one set of truths more important than another set of truths. For the present I am desirous only of showing why there is more than one way — of explaining

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the necessity of different methods for the expression of different individualities and different ways of envisaging nature and art. But a little while ago it was the modern or impressionistic manner that needed explanation. It was new, it was revolutionary, and it was misunderstood and disliked. A generation of critics has been busy in explaining it, a generation of artists has been busy in practising it, and now the balance has turned the other way. The pressure of conformity is upon the other side and it is the older methods that need justification and explanation. The prejudices of the workers and the writers have gradually and naturally become the prejudices of at least a part of the public, and it has become necessary to show that the small minority

of artists who still follow the old roads do so, not from ignorance or stupidity or a stolid conservatism, still less from mere wilful caprice, but from necessity; because those roads are the only ones that can lead them where they wish to go. No more magnificent demonstration of the qualities possible to the purely modern methods of painting has been made than this brilliant little picture of Sargent's. All the more is it a demonstration of the qualities impossible to these methods. If such qualities have any permanent value and interest for the modern world it is a gain for art that some painters should try to keep alive the methods that render possible their attainment.

KENYON COX.



THE HERMIT
BY
JOHN SINGER SARGENT